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A Learning Community's Potential Academic Impact:
A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Learning Communities (LC) in higher education can serve as powerful connectors among individuals, particularly when integrating minority and White students. We conducted 24 in-depth interviews, using qualitative research methodology, with the 2004 cohort of LC students from a private, selective, Midwest university. Seniors at the time of interviews, the students reflected on their perceived outcomes of their freshman LC experiences. Elsewhere (Firmin, Warner, Johnson, Firebaugh, & Firmin, 2009a), we reported that participants showed the experience to hold a cogent social purpose, with many members recounting memories with a sense of positive nostalgia. We also reported attitudinal outcomes of the participants LC experience, with members' shifts in biases, level of satisfaction, and factors related to involvement (Firmin, Warner, Johnson, Firebaugh, & Firmin, 2008b). Present findings discuss the academic experience of members who participated in the LC program. Students reported that the social functions of the LC supported academic activities and learning. Students also developed relationships with the professors, and many viewed the instructors as being influential mentors.

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University administration and faculty report desiring to promote and increase diversity across college settings (Challenger, 2004). Learning Communities (LC) are relatively recent programs aimed at contributing to this objective. A LC is a group of students who interact in formal programming for a specific purpose in academic and social situations. There are various types of LCs, such as those focused on particular subject matters or commonalities among students. A key aspect of most LCs is the opportunity for networking and social support (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006). Thomas (1993) reports that the freshman year of college is a critical time for students to construct a strong academic foundation. LCs are a potential venue to help create that firm foundation.

One specific type of LC focuses particularly on multi-cultural issues. These may be especially beneficial at colleges with a primarily mono-racial or mono-cultural student composition (Park, 2009). The goal of multi-cultural LCs is to enhance the diversity opportunities available at the institution. Students are placed in cohort groups that interact in academic environments, such as classes, as well as in social activities (Tosey & Gregory, 1998). Cross (1998) found that close cohorts can create a more holistic learning environment for some students. A major challenge facing school administrators is retention, and minority student attrition can pose a particular difficulty for some institutions. LCs have been to shown to increase college retention rates (Hegler, 2004).

Research shows that LCs offer certain benefits to students. For example, Zhao and Kuh (2004) reported that learning groups can foster heightened academic achievement and the sense of personal self-gains in students involved in a learning group. Students also reported the existence of an enhanced positive atmosphere at their institution. Zhao and Kuh also found that the organization of LCs fostered increased interaction and the development of social relationships with peers and faculty that likely would not have occurred without the LC structural framework. Cox (2004) found positive results when LCs were administered with appropriate sensitivity. Minority students can benefit from the academic integration into the college or university through LC participation. This is particularly important since Eimers and Pike (1997) reported that minority students tend to receive less overall external social support than non-minority students.

LCs can encourage educational gains as well. Chung and Sedlacek (1999) reported that a diversified student environment promoted learning in their sample. Although parents' cultural attitudes and beliefs affect students' perceived value of academic achievement, LCs can offer a nurturing learning environment that enhances the fulfillment of individual and group goals (Roach, 2004). LCs also have been shown to promote social and attitudinal benefits (James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006). Stereotypes may be lessened and critical thinking skills can be developed in diverse social and educational environments through LC participation (King, 1999). Minority and non-minority students reported, in a study by Meacham, McClellan, Pearse, and Greene (2003), that a diversified classroom provided opportunities for discussing challenging topics and gaining cultural awareness. Caucasian students with more diverse life experiences have demonstrated higher interests in understanding the perspectives of others. These students also showed an increased desire to pursue a graduate degree (Roach, 2004). The social impact of LCs is salient since freshman students may use LCs as social resources. For example, Jalomo and Rendon (2004) indicated that students who participated in LCs were able to meet others with whom they otherwise would not have interacted. Connecting with people from different

ethnicities also can promote cultural awareness and leadership skill development (Antonio, 2001).

In sum, research suggests potential benefits available for students who participate in LCs. Consequently, we sought to determine if the 2004 pilot year of a LC at a selective, private, Midwest university would provide these boons implied in the research literature. In order to allow the individuals free reign in expressing their experiences and opinions of success or failures of their cohort, we followed the construct of qualitative methodology. These students were seniors at the time of interviews, and they reflected on their experiences of the LC when they had been an active member. They also were asked to note perceived lasting effects of their participation, if any. We believe our findings will enhance the understanding of students' reactions to interacting in a LC—providing potential insights for future LC directors.

The purpose of the present undertaking was to generate a phenomenological, qualitative research study. The intent of this paradigm is to explain experiences and understandings of a construct from the viewpoints of the individuals who undergo the activities (Cope, 2004). It is exploratory, by nature, and researchers report inductively—relating what the participants report—rather than searching deductively for anticipated findings. Consequently, here we report the two findings that participants consistently and repeatedly related vis-à-vis their freshman year LC experiences.

Method

Participants

The members in this study were students at a private, selective, comprehensive Midwest university of the United States, with an undergraduate student enrollment of slightly over 3,000. Grant funding during the 2004 pilot year of the LC made the LC study possible. The university is primarily Caucasian, with only approximately 6 % population being minority. Of the original 42 freshman students placed in the LC, we interviewed 24 individuals, 14 female and 10 male. Due to the purposeful multicultural nature of the LC, there was a variety of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. These included Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian, Multi-Racial, and African-American. Thirteen of the students reported moderate to high levels of involvement, two rated themselves at medium-level participation, five described low involvement, and three were not involved (although they were placed in some of the same classes with other LC students, this obviously did not guarantee a personal commitment to LC participation). Faculty who were directly involved with the LC program contacted students in order to inform them of the students' freshman LC status, primarily through phone calls. A letter was also sent to their respective homes prior to students arriving on campus.

The University's LC Program

The purpose of the LC was to create a diverse, multi-cultural environment for in-coming freshmen. The goal was for students to be able to socially network with other students and receive mentorship from involved faculty. Four professors were involved in teaching classes, consisting of primarily LC students. The students who were in the LC program also participated in social events and bi-monthly group meetings. The LC students were primarily placed in four general education courses (two per semester) with other LC members. Some courses consisted exclusively of LC members (e.g., their Speech class). Students would gather for extracurricular activities such as bi-weekly group meetings, dinner at a LC-involved professor's house, and a

field trip to a museum. The bi-weekly meetings were loosely-structured and typically included an educational or culturally-relevant activity. The LC class divisions and structured activities existed during the school year of 2004-2005 and officially terminated with the start of the students' sophomore year.

Data Collection and Analysis

Tape-recorded, semi-structured interviews (Sideman, 2006) with the LC members were conducted during the spring 2008 semester and later transcribed for analysis. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility when interviewing participants. Participants could take the interview different directions, elaborating on various points, relating stories and sharing personal accounts. We believed this best would provide rich-and-thick descriptions of students' percepts regarding their previous LC experiences. All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy of professors and students involved. This present study was designed to be a phenomenological research study. Our aim was to garner LC members' views of their experience from three years prior. The primary research question involved exploring memories, feelings about their involvement, and any perceived potential academic benefits of the LC participants.

Using Maxwell's (2005) protocol, we implemented an open coding process. We followed an inductive approach where we arrived at general, over-arching themes from broad statements from the data. The research team collaborated repeatedly in coding the data and generating potential themes. Constant comparison techniques (Bereska, 2003) were utilized in coding the responses from the participants. We contrasted and matched the responses from the interview transcripts, assessing recurrent constructs in the transcripts. Consistent themes that were supported and repeated by most of the participants were kept; those that were not repeated were later discarded (Marshall, 2002). The process of moving from coding the data to thematic analysis involved organizational review, concept mapping, visual displays of findings, and asked key questions (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008).

Qualitative researchers often approach the notion of theory with different perspectives. Some advocate that theory should be embedded into the research design and analysis of the findings (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Others, however, recognize the potential drawbacks of this approach and, instead, indicate that qualitative research best should be atheoretical in design and analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). In this paradigm, it is the role of the reader, not the researcher to use theory when reading a research article. Naturally, we will not solve this long-term debate in qualitative circles—but we explicitly state our long-term held position of not using theory in qualitative research design or interpretation. This is stated here to assure the reader that its lack of use in the methods and discussion section of this article is not an oversight. Rather, it is deliberate and follows a protocol for a legitimate means of conducting qualitative research methodology (Cresswell, 2007).

Internal validity for our findings was strengthened in a number of ways. Consensus among the multiple researchers provided checks and opportunities to consider alternative explanations for potential findings (Silverman, 2006). Consensus was reached among the authors regarding the themes we report as being representative of the participants. In addition, an outside qualitative researcher uninvolved in the data collection appraised the methodology and conclusions (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005; Merriam, 2002). We also generated a data trail

(Armiknio & Hutgren, 2002; Daytner, 2006), connecting each reported theme to the data in the transcripts. NVIVO-8 software was useful in the coding process, especially in creating the data audit. Particularly, grounding of our findings to specific quotations was enhanced by this computer software.

Member checks also were utilized in order to strengthen internal validity (Padgett, Matthew, & Conte, 2004). Participants related that the overall findings were congruent with their own sentiments and perspectives. Saturation (Neuman, 2006) occurred in the data collection and analysis. Specifically, after around 20 or so interviews, we found the ideas and themes of the participants were relatively consistent. New individuals added to the research sample resulted in diminishing returns. Consequently, we believe that the 24participants in this research study were sufficient and consistent with sound qualitative methods protocol (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006). In sum, we sought to create a research study that possessed rigor and fit the traditional qualitative research design (Cope, 2004, Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers, 2002). Internal validity was an emphasis throughout the whole process, from inception to finalization.

Results

We identified three themes representative of the data provided by the LC students: social outcomes, attitudinal outcomes, and academic outcomes. Previously, the current authors (Firmin, Warner, Johnson, Firebaugh, & Firmin, 2008; Firmin, Warner, Firebaugh, Johnson, & Firmin, 2008) presented findings that related to LC's social and attitudinal outcomes experiences. Students reported that the primary motivator for their participation in the LC was for social reasons. Social outcomes included student participation in further multi-cultural and diversity-oriented campus activities. The attitudinal outcomes related students' shifts in biases and stereotypes, their decisions to become involved, their levels of satisfaction, and suggestions for future learning communities. The present article focuses particularly on the academic outcomes of the multi-cultural learning community. Two salient academic themes that emerged from the data: academic support issues and interaction with the faculty.

Academic Support Issues

A cogent theme in the data showed that social support in the LC benefitted students academically as well. Particularly, the participants reported that the social ease and healthy relationships they experienced in the LC promoted learning. Students indicated that they felt comfortable in the classroom among their peers and instructors and they enjoyed interacting with familiar faces in the classroom setting. Jason stated: "You feel more comfortable around people that you spend more time with." This was said to encourage students' involvement in class activities and discussions. Dominique expressed: "I liked it a lot, having somebody that you're comfortable with that you can just say something to, something that you're thinking." Adjusting to any new milieu, including the first year in college, can be stressful. Further, stress often interferes with optimal learning. LC participants indicated that, by engaging socially with familiar people, they felt more at ease and they experienced better social support. Marcus shared sentiments similar to most LC participants we interviewed:

> It made them a lot more fun because we were all just comfortable with each other. So socially classes were just fun and we enjoyed them. Academically, it was nice. I wouldn't say it made the course work easier, but it was nice just to be able to bounce ideas off of

each other or remind each other of when things are due, or to work together on projects. So it helped in that regard.

Students felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions with others, free of some common freshman hindrances such as the unfamiliarity of others and formality in the classroom environment. Taylor shared that he felt "relaxed, and I felt like I learned more just from the aspect that we all felt comfortable to ask questions, and discuss real issues. We talked about real things going on instead of just the typical….more like experiential, like learning in the process in the classroom together." Familiarly does not always breed contempt. Sometimes it helps to ground students so that they possess bearings with familiar people. Dinah expressed: "It was nice when we went from one class to the next with like, 'Oh yeah, you're going to be in this.'"

Students gained friendships from being in the same classes with others in the LC. These relationships were a form of social and educational support in larger classes. Shaela expressed "some of the classes I was with people from the Learning Community and those were typically my closest friends in those classes… With those big classes, it helped to give it a little more of a personal, relational-based feel, instead of just a teacher-student type thing." Jason shared similarly: "The biggest thing I remember and to this day still is it helped me to form a lot of friendships. So that was probably the biggest thing." This familiarity with peers increased student's comfort and, ultimately, provided them a more optimal learning environment.

Students reported that they were more apt to study together outside of class than what they were likely to have done otherwise. Jason elaborated: "I definitely met a lot of people through classes. Because we all had the same classes together, I felt like more comfortable being willing to study outside of classes, things like that. So it helped me academically too." The relationships gendered in the LC experienced were indicated to have made connected study more likely. The peer-helping behaviors that resulted were said to have been useful. Ruth, for example, commented: "It was good to have people to study with, and you know college is totally different than high school (laughs) and so figuring out how to do papers and stuff like that. It's definitely helpful to have people to work with and people who you are comfortable with."

Students reported that their classes were more enjoyable because of the social relationships they had with their peers. They appreciated students in class who eventually became their friends. Students seemed to especially enjoy the Speech class, due to the reportedly pleasant and fun atmosphere created by the instructor (Dan), and the fact that they were friends with people in the class. Jin described: "I think, especially my Speech class, I remember that being like a really fun time. I just felt like no one else has a Speech class like this. It just felt really family-like, so therefore, like I said, it just made me feel more comfortable to do things outside of the classroom and, you know, we'd eat lunch together, and stuff like that." The LC seemingly provided a microcosm, of sorts, for LC students where they felt some level of bonding—and that was to aid their overall academic experience. For students in our sample, affective and cognitive variables intertwined. Tiffany commented: "I think it (the LC) made Speech easier to take because we all had that common, you know, like 'Hey, we're all in the LC.' We have that common thread, so we're kind of more comfortable with each other. And Dan made it, you know, easy and comfortable and cracking jokes all the time."

Participation in the LC also was said to increase certain students' confidence in the classroom. This improved confidence was discussed as if it evidently enhanced students' perceived self-efficacy. Andrea, for example, reported:

> I had an increased confidence level in the classroom….The classroom confidence has been major for me. I'm not sure that I should have been involved more than I was or kept up the friendships from the group. I don't regret anything about the way things have gone for me at college as I have grown exponentially since my first day.

Students frequently spoke of feeling better able to face the rigors of academic classes, since they knew the other students and had a shared sense of the challenge before them. For these participants, LC participation seemingly enhanced their overall positive self-beliefs.

Interaction with Faculty

A second academic theme found in students' interviews related to their interactions with faculty. Specifically, an important benefit of the LC on which students reflected was the opportunity to work closely with faculty. Students remarked fondly about their professors' influences. Marisol enthused: "I loved all the professors! I feel like I got the best professors in those particular Gen Ed classes and that I got to know many of them better than other students did." Many students bonded and formed close attachments with individual faculty members. They also reported learning life lessons as well that became formative enhancements to their respective freshman experiences. This seemingly became a value-added dynamic to the overall freshman year. Claire shared how her Composition professor shaped her:

> I think it was my composition class Dr. Mays was talking about how it's my responsibility to learn. And learning is like a blessing because you can come to class and write down information and whatever and just study and whatnot. But learning is so much more than just getting a good grade. And so she really tried to challenge us to not think of this as just another day at school, another class, but this is an opportunity to learn. And maybe not just in this class, but learn about yourself and learn in life. Because you can learn a lot more than just what you have to write down in your notes. Take initiative, because we're only cheating ourselves when we don't really do our work completely. It doesn't really affect her, it only affects us. That was just something that stuck with me.

> Students noted particularly close relationships with some of the faculty members. Students shared how these professors impacted them in multiple ways and across numerous courses. For example, students recalled Dr. Geer's fun, easy-going nature, and his ability to make class time enjoyable. This close, casual relationship was demonstrated by many students we interviewed referring to him by his first name, Dan. Carlita elaborated:

> Dan was just a lot of fun. He's a good professor. I'm not a huge fan of writing speeches, but he really did help us a lot. He made it enjoyable, and I don't really talk to him as much now, but freshman year we had a good relationship.

Students similarly expressed admiration and gratitude for the knowledge they gleaned from Dr. Williams, such as Karina who used the phrase "big respect" when referencing her. Jose shared:

> I only really knew Dr. Williams, and I've always really liked her actually. She didn't have just one way of looking at things, she always presented different views so I feel like I connected with her; I felt like I understood where she was coming from always.

When students made particular references to Dr. Williams, often they used familial-type words, such as "mothering" and "children." They seemingly felt the care she demonstrated for LC students' academic well-being. Latisha described:

> And Dr. Williams, of course, she's just so wonderful and so sweet. I took a class from her because I was like, I miss her. I feel like we're kind of like her children or something. She just loves us—the LC kids—so much. She's the one that I'm connected to the most.

Students who participated in the LC shared that they felt a closer connection to the faculty due to the professors' involvement in the LC. Interacting with professors outside of class enabled the development of closer student-faculty relationships than regular classes provided. Tina expressed:

> It made it a lot more fun, and then it was nice too because some classes, like the Speech class, Dan knew these people. Like, it was very obvious that he was involved in the Learning Community, and we were part of it, so that even between the professor and the student, there was another level of interaction that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

While evidently maintaining a healthy professional respect for LC instructions, participants indicated that seeing a more 360-perspective of faculty enhanced their comfort-levels of these professors in the formality of the university classroom. Ricky illustrated this point:

> I'd say it left for a good relationship with the faculty who were involved because you felt like you knew them outside of the classroom…We would see the different side of the professors than what we would just see in classes or how they acted in classes… So I would say that the relationship with the professors improved because we knew that they were out there to help us. We knew that they were in support of this community and
> support for what we're doing. It shows that they care because they're a part of it and they're dedicated to it.

Most students initially decided to participate in the LC because a faculty member contacted them. This type of personal interaction persuaded many to explore the LC and become involved. Jason, for instance, described:

> The only reason I really did it in the first place was because Dr. Williams called me at my house in the summer before we even got to [the university] and explained the program a little, then asked me to participate. If we went back in time and she had never asked me to do it, I probably wouldn't have. Or if I would have been contacted via email and randomly decided to go to the first meeting, I probably would have never gone back. I mostly only did it because I felt obligated by Dr. William's invitation.

Other students echoed Jason's sentiments and stated that their initial involvement came after contact from a faculty member. Evidently a more personal connection—such as a phone call—was considered more effectual to most of the LC students than less personal communiqués, such as written letters.

LC faculty members also played the role of confidante. LC participants expressed an increased level of trust and comfort toward some of the LC faculty as compared to other faculty. Karina expressed: "It was just a very familiar and comfortable atmosphere. We had a good time, and we still learned." Students described that they would be more likely to confide in an LC faculty member and discuss issues and concerns. This personal trust and confidence was said to enhance students' overall freshman experience learning experiences. Carla related this point:

I felt like he (Dan) is a member of the faculty and if I had a problem, he would be the person that I would go to I think. Like I maybe didn't necessarily need that—it's not like I had a problem that I needed someone to go talk to. But it was nice to know that I had someone there that I felt like I could talk to about anything. I thought it was good.

This willingness to confide seemingly was more than just a warm feeling that students had about some LC faculty. Rather, it evidently translated into students letting-down their guards and seeking-out personal contact that otherwise they felt they would not have done.

Discussion

The finding that social atmosphere was reported to have impacted academics in a LC program corroborates some previous research by James et al. (2006). They reported that learning communities potentially can provide the opportunity for networking and the development of social relationships. Students in the present study, and also James et al's, reported an increased motivation and ease for learning when they felt comfortable with their fellow students and professor. Zhao and Kuh (2004) reported that learning groups promote increased academic achievement. Similarly, in our present study, students reported an increased enjoyment of the learning process. Students generally also felt that the social aspect of the LC experience increased their confidence in the classroom. This finding is similar to Zhao and Kuh's conclusion that learning groups can develop a sense of accomplishment in students.

Most students also described a connection to the instructors. Many of the LC professors were available to students outside of formal class hours and developed relationships with the LC students. This corroborates with Zhao and Kuh's (2004) finding that LCs encourage increased interaction and the opportunity for social relationships with peers and faculty that would not likely have occurred without the LC. Some students recounted how they still felt connected to particular professors. Certain instructors impacted students and shared life lessons along with course material.

A common tie-in between the two academic themes reported in the present study is the construct of relationships. These were shown to be particularly cogent. The participants in the study related that relationships that developed among themselves and also relationships that developed between themselves and the faculty members had lasting effects in ways they still felt-three years after the LC experience. The integration of social with the academic is one of the most salient findings of the study. That is, participants seemingly rejected dualist notions of social relationships being one isolated part of their college life and academics being another, separated compartment. Rather, they consistently described the interaction between these two life components. The social aspects of their LC experience integrated into the academic components of their freshmen year.

We believe the findings in the present study have important potential implications for both divisions of student life and also the academic divisions of American universities. Although the two domains typically are operated by different vice presidents and have no organic connection in terms of line and staff operations—results from this study suggest that the two divisions should work in concert. Foster social connections among students—and among faculty—seem to make potentially important differences in how freshmen can perceive their first year college experiences. Both through LCs and also through general student life programming,

academic deans and student life deans would do well to consider how they best can work together in order to seam-together freshmen connections. The cogent dynamics can be tapped and channeled in order to help provide first year students with optimal learning success in the classroom.

Limitations and Future Research

All good research recognizes limitations of a study and reports them (Price & Murnan, 2004). Research regarding LCs can be strengthened with replication of this present study at various types of colleges and universities in different regions of the country. The results may be varied or more profound for institutions with a large student body or with an increased minority student population. In addition, it would be helpful to interview participants of LCs while they are current members of the LC group. A current perspective may provide a different viewpoint than a retrospective one. That is, retrospective feedback of the LC experience may not provide an entirely accurate report in that positive experiences may be exacerbated and negative experiences may be downplayed.

Additionally, these pilot-year students' perspectives may have been influenced by interactions with LC members of subsequent years. Since 2004, every new academic year begins with the creation of a new LC cohort comprised of freshmen. For future research, replicating this study with students in subsequent years may provide insight vis-a-vis improvements in the overall organization of the LC group.

And finally, the results related in the present article reflect mostly the sentiments of those who actively participated in the LC. As noted, there were some students who chose not to participate in the LC experience, although they were members of the LC group. Future research should focus on these individuals and their reasons for not desiring to participate. These results can help assess what might be improved in the program in order to increase the overall yield of participation in the group. Such findings can be implemented into the planning and organization of campus LCs as they continue to improve through integrating empirical data into a continuous improvement feedback-loop.

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